

# THE COMEDY OF THE FIRST EDITION

BY BELLE MOSES



"WONDER," said Miss Henrietta, pausing in the execution of a "row" she was performing on a nondescript knitted shawl, and looking reflectively at her pretty niece, who was scribbling notes at a dainty writing desk.

"We all do, Auntie; I'm wondering, for instance, why I don't have a secretary. I've half a mind to hang out a little sign 'Not at home' when the postman whistles in the morning. If it wasn't for the one or two sensible letters occasionally to be found in all this rubbish, I believe I'd be sorely tempted. But you're not listening, and I'm sure that wonder still possesses you. Out with it, ma'am!" and Beatrice tapped peremptorily with her penholder.

"I was wondering," and Miss Henrietta fidgeted nervously in her low chair and bent a telltale face over her knitting, "how people—Kipling and Stevenson, you know—and all the others—ever got their—things—stories, I mean—into print. It must be very trying to—to ask publishers—to read them."

"Why, that's what publishers are made for—to read things. And I don't believe Kipling and Stevenson ever had much trouble. Still, it takes a very 'cheeky' sort of person to attack them in their dens," and Beatrice shot a quick glance at the timid little woman in the rocker. Then with a sudden change of voice—

"Auntie, have you been writing anything?"

The elder Miss Clayton looked up with a guilty air. "You have!" and, flinging down her pen, Beatrice sprang up, and the next instant was shaking her gently, with her hands on her shoulders.

The aunt and niece were strikingly unlike. Miss Henrietta was a blonde of the faded beauty type, and Beatrice was tall and dark and radiant with youth and health; but long years of association and the sweet and unselfish care lavished by the elder upon the younger woman had cemented a bond of devotion rarely to be found in such a relationship.

"Tell me all about it," demanded the girl, "and take it out of your pocket. I know it's there; I see the bulge. Now read it to me at once, and no skipping."

Having wrested the much abused shawl from Miss Henrietta's passive hands, that lady in fear and trembling brought forth the manuscript.

"Poetry!" exclaimed Beatrice, catching sight of neatly written verses. "Read me every line, you deep and scheming woman," and settling herself in the low window niche she leaned back, prepared for enjoyment.

Miss Henrietta began with that certain peculiar intonation belonging to a bygone school of poetic interpretation, certainly not Browningsque. For an hour or more Beatrice listened, absorbed, and as Miss Henrietta's voice sank into silence she openly wiped her eyes.

"It's all very pathetic and charming," she declared. "Where did you get your beautiful ideas? Tell me all about it."

Whereupon Miss Henrietta launched into a full description of her feelings and aspirations, after the manner of budding poets. It needed only a little encouragement, a word or two, a nod or two from Beatrice to transform this timid little woman into a conquering Amazon, ready to storm editorial sanctums, walk over publishers and "hang her banners on the outer walls" of undying fame.

"Now, how shall we go to work?" said Beatrice, "for of course they must be published."

"I'd like to have them published," Miss Henrietta clung to a last shred of modesty.

"They shall be published. I will see them through," declared Beatrice with a determined air and a rise of color. "I know a man who publishes books, and as soon as we have the verses typewritten I'll take them down to his office myself."

"Oh, no!" cried Miss Henrietta, horrified, as immediate action was brought to her very door. "I—I don't think it's proper. I really don't believe nice ladies go to such—such places."

"Nonsense! I hear they are quite respectable and delightfully Bohemian. Besides, I know Mr. Dudley."

"Mercy me, child! You'd never take it to him!"

"Why not? It's always well to have literary influence," said Miss Beatrice, with charming naïveté; "we'll give your book a singing title, Auntie, and with your name at the end it will make an imposing collection."

But here Miss Henrietta was firm. "I won't write under my own name, yet," she said.

"Oh, well, a pseudonym will do just as well. Now what shall it be?" and Beatrice stared into space, and pulled a short curl on her forehead to facilitate thought.

"I have it!" she cried. "George Eliot and Currer Bell are masculine pen names; suppose you take 'Jack Spratt.' Now you are completely disguised. No one could possibly find you out," and for a moment Beatrice whirled gracefully around the room, winding up with a sweeping curtsy, in front of her astonished and bewildered relative.

A few days later the Clayton carriage stopped in front of the huge building in which were located the offices of Dudley, Fordham & Co., and Beatrice, daintily gowned, with a most bewitching fur boa and soul stirring hat, tripped out, and with bold front advanced upon the elevator boy.

"Mr. Dudley, of Dudley, Fordham & Co.?" she said, in a voice that was the elevator boy's undoing.

"Sixth floor," he answered in trembling tones, unconsciously slackening speed.

"Third door to your right," was his parting direction; "No. 615."

Beatrice tapped at No. 615. The door was opened by a diminutive "buttons," to whom she handed her card. "I wish to see Mr. Dudley," she said.

"He's busy," was the laconic reply.

"Please give him that card and tell him I wish to see him at once," and Beatrice spoke in a tone which sent the small boy bounding to an inner sanctum. He returned in five minutes' time.

"He says—please to be seated—he'll see you presently," and, placing a chair for her, "buttons" retired discreetly.

Beatrice was hot with anger. Accustomed to see men hasten at her call, accustomed especially to see Arthur Dudley hang upon her every word, his conduct in this instance was abominable. She sat, inwardly fuming, for at least fifteen minutes, when the door of the office marked, "Private" was opened, and two gentlemen came out. One was Arthur Dudley, who hastened toward her with an apologetic air and outstretched hand.

"I am sorry to have kept you, Miss Clayton; just step back into my office."

"I came only on business," returned Beatrice, following him, but ignoring his hand. By this time she had brought Miss Henrietta's poems from their place of concealment. "I have something to submit to you for publication," she began, coldly. "A—a friend of mine—" she paused, a sudden embarrassment coming over her, and held out the manuscript.

Dudley took it from her with a faint smile. So many embryo authors had talented "friends." He opened it and glanced through it with a professional eye, while Beatrice went on:—

"My friend is anxious to have your honest criticism, of course."

"The acceptance or rejection of a manuscript is all the criticism we allow ourselves, Miss Clayton. It's a mere matter of business, you see."

"But my friend does not mind the money. The expenses of publication would, of course, be defrayed. I suppose that is customary?"

"Well, in exceptional cases," answered Dudley, bending over the manuscript to hide his amusement.

"Then make this case the exception; consider that part of the compact. I couldn't allow you to assume any unnecessary risks—my friend would not be willing."

"How would you like this published—in book form?" inquired Dudley, looking doubtfully at the meagre manuscript.

"Oh, yes! a little book. I think if it were attractive it might sell, and she—my friend, I mean—" Beatrice caught herself with a stumble, and blushed adorably.

"Of course 'Jack Spratt' is a pseudonym," she confessed.

"It did look suspicious," commented Dudley, gravely.

"Well, anyway, my friend is anxious only for fame; she doesn't care a bit for the money."

"I see," he said, musingly. "Now, in case I should decide to accept this, about how many would you like for a first edition?"

She thought deeply for a moment. "I should say five hundred or a thousand, at least—I—I mean, my friend—wishes no limit to the circulation."

"H'm! It's always well to be a little prudent just at the start. Suppose we say three hundred for the first edition?"

"Of course, if you think best; I trust entirely to you. When will it be done?" she asked, in very much the same tone she would have used to her dressmaker.

"These publications take time," he hinted.

"I know that; but you see—I—I have a feeling that these poems will sell like—like hot cakes." Beatrice used the comparison with a ravishing smile and Arthur Dudley lost his head.

"If you were the saleswoman I think they would," he said, in a low tone.

"Mr. Dudley, you forget yourself," and Beatrice privately agreed with her aunt that an editorial sanctum was not the place for her. "I'm sorry, but you shouldn't have mentioned hot cakes," and his look sent Beatrice to the door.

"It's a bargain then?" he asked, following her.

"What do you mean?" She paused with her hand on the knob. "That it I make a success of this first edition you—"

"Good morning, Mr. Dudley." With very pink cheeks Beatrice made her escape, and the elevator boy, who had lain in wait for her, marvelled that there was such beauty upon the earth.

Arthur Dudley slowly opened the manuscript after Beatrice left. "Verses," he muttered; "that speaks poorly for her state of mind but excellently well for my cause."

"Hello, Hamlet! Don't stand out there soliloquizing, but come in and show me your spoils. Pretty girl, that Miss Clayton. No wonder you're clean daft. What's she gone and done?"

"Poetry!" groaned Dudley.

Ralph Fordham got up and whistled. Then he sat down, with his hands in his pockets and cast a comical look across the big table. He was a privileged friend or Dudley would have kicked him.

"Poor old chap! it is hard. Have you read any?"

"One or two lines en passant."

"Let's hear."

"Botheration! You can't expect personality in such things as these. It isn't fair."

"I've surely a right to see the 'things,' as you call them, being your partner."

"I suppose I have no right to hold them back as she desires to publish them," said Dudley, turning the typewritten sheets.

"Here's a line—"

The roseate dawn, deep hued, proclaims the morn—

"Miltonian," commented Ralph.

The thunder, rumbling with incessant roar,  
Joined with the wind that round the casement tore;  
The marble face, pressed close against the pane,  
Looked out upon the lightning and the rain.

"Good Lord!"

"I'll punch your head if you're not careful," warned Dudley.

Her eyes, like myriad stars, flashed on the night.

"I've heard of seeing stars, but her simile's phenomenal. Look here. Has she written much more of that stuff?"

Dudley nodded hopelessly.

"What does she write about?"

"Oh, the usual themes—love, ambition, sacrifice, a void, untenanted—that's her heart," Dudley laughed a little bitterly.

"Maybe it's for rent," suggested Ralph.

Dudley turned on him fiercely. "Look here! don't joke; you know that I love her, and it's gall and wormwood to see her spreading herself in this ridiculous way."

"Why do you encourage it?"

"I? My dear fellow, I never suspected her of such a thing. A sensible up to date girl like that."

"And we're to publish this? I think I heard you pledge yourself."

Dudley flushed.

"It won't be any loss to the firm. In fact, she insisted on defraying all expenses. Of course I couldn't let her do that. You know it will come out of my own private funds."

"Expensive wooing, eh? And I believe you're also pledged to dispose of the first edition?"

"Oh, that's the easiest part; I'll scatter them among the book stores, and send emissaries to buy them in; my only comfort is that 'Jack Spratt' will never betray her."

"She may be so proud of them that she'll betray herself. Well, go ahead. I wash my hands of the job and wish you luck."

And this he literally proceeded to do; on Dudley's shoulders fell the whole burden, his sole reward being the frequent business consultations he managed to arrange with his client. He guided her innocent footsteps through the trying processes of the printing; he gave her editorial instructions when the proof came in; and altogether the intercourse was of such a frank and friendly nature that Dudley began to look ahead and build castles.

Of course Miss Henrietta never appeared at these conferences, though Beatrice carefully repeated every detail which bore upon the impending publication; there were other details which she as carefully avoided, but a reader of the heart, whose thoughts on such matters were to meet the eyes of the world, could not be deceived, and the good lady rejoiced that she should be the means of cementing something more than a bond of friendship between these two.

Of course they met in society, where by a tacit understanding

"You need not have told me this to-day."

"And why not?"

"It—it looks as if you—expected some reward for—for your kindness, as it"—She broke off in confusion.

He leaned forward and boldly possessed himself of both her hands.

"It is true. I worked hard for my reward, and I claim it shamelessly." Still holding the slim, white hands, he left the big chair, and stood now towering above her—which is, of course, a great advantage in lovemaking—the head of the vanquished thus comes dangerously near the shoulder of the victor, and the result is inevitable. It was in this instance, and for several moments this romance of life was a song without words.

"I can't wait long for my happiness," he said at last, drawing her down into the great chair beside him—"I'm an impatient man, Beatrice, and I want my wife."

But Beatrice would not wear her chains so lightly.

"You may have her," she said, shaking an admonishing finger, "when—when the first edition is sold."

"Done!" he cried in boyish glee, "you may book that wedding for June," and then and there they sealed the compact in a way common to lovers.

But in his saner moments Arthur Dudley's practical mind saw difficulties. His one object being to save "Jack Spratt" from the condemnation, or at best the ridicule, of the critics, there was only one course open to him, as he had told his partner—to buy up the whole edition. He had expected to do this quietly before they were apportioned to the booksellers, but Beatrice, who felt that she owed all her happiness to Miss Henrietta, determined to leave no stone unturned by which this beloved relative could attain the pinnacle of fame, and day after day poor Dudley accompanied her as her carriage went the rounds, distributing the little volumes among the bookstores, in modest packages containing twenty-five.

"My friend wants to reserve twenty-five to give to the libraries and present as keepsakes; the money she makes she will donate to charity," announced Beatrice, whereat her patient lover groaned in spirit, but he set to work in earnest, employing small boys and under clerks, and even one or two of the home servants were pressed into service. They were sent in different directions, and so well did they work that at the end of six weeks the entire edition, minus the presentation copies and a few purchased by Beatrice and her friends, reposed in safety on the shelves of Dudley, Fordham & Co., while Miss Henrietta revelled in many bank notes and Dudley breathed a sigh of relief.

Still another trial was in store for him.

"Arthur, dear"—when Beatrice called him "Arthur, dear," there was no resisting her—"my friend thinks it so curious that her



"IT IS A GREAT PLEASURE TO GIVE HAPPINESS TO OTHERS—ISN'T IT?" SHE BROKE OFF ENIGMATICALLY.

the book was never mentioned, but there were delicious off hours, between sunset and dinner, when a word or two in Beatrice's dainty sitting room seemed absolutely necessary, and he would lean back in a certain delightful arm chair, beside a picturesque log fire, watching the graceful figure as it hovered round the tea table, and with a cup of her well brewed tea in his hand, and his eyes upon her charming face, so full of life and color, it was easy enough to discourse of "processes" and "copy" and "proofs" and "plates" and other technical terms, meaning, "I love you," until consciousness would occasionally rouse him to a sense of other obligations, and he would remember a dinner engagement in the nick of time.

At last came the day when the little book was launched. It was a "red letter" day for Miss Henrietta, and Beatrice was quite as excited. And Dudley was even more excited at the girl's innocent pleasure.

"You have made me very happy," she said, at the close of that special day, when he had "dropped in" to see how she was "bearing up," that being his sole excuse.

"And your friend?" he asked, thinking that now, if ever, was the time for confession.

Beatrice flushed and dropped her eyes. The secret was still Miss Henrietta's, who had decided that like George Eliot, her real name should be unknown until an appreciative public clamored for her to reveal her identity.

"Oh—my friend—" murmured Beatrice—"she—she—it is a great pleasure to give happiness to others—isn't it?" she broke off enigmatically, as she placed her tea near him on a tiny tabouret.

"Yes," he replied laconically, for he had fondly expected her confidence.

She detected the disappointment in his tone, and coming a little nearer, tapped him gently on the shoulder with the sugar tongs.

"You know that feeling—you can appreciate it," she said softly. "Take some sugar."

But he took the tongs instead, and with a sudden movement—drew them and the hand that held them close to his lips—and the deed was done; the next moment he found himself in sole possession of the tongs, while Beatrice stood above him, pale and indignant.

For a moment there was silence—then—"I didn't think you would do such a thing, Mr. Dudley."

"Neither did I. I never was more surprised in my life. It was positively an inspiration. I only wish," regretfully, "that it had been two hands instead of one, for I love you, Beatrice." He did not move from his chair. He was afraid to spoil the moment, but his eyes held her where she stood.

book has excited no newspaper comment—I suppose it's just an oversight—but if you knew any editor of a newspaper—it seems to me"—And she gave him such a wonderful smile that Dudley rushed away and perjured his soul by the following paragraph—which appeared in print a few days after:—

"A very beautiful little book has been received at this office, which we are happy to notice in this issue. 'Jack Spratt' conveys no idea as to the identity of the author, but the poems indicate refinement of feeling, delicacy of expression, with a promise of even better things hereafter."

"The Lord forgive me!" was Dudley's murmured prayer as he carried his handiwork to the editorial sanctum of a newspaper friend.

"Shove it in, Thompson, and I'll invite you to my wedding on the spot."

So the thing was done, and Dudley felt no qualms when Beatrice was more than usually demonstrative and grateful.

They were married in June, and after the wedding journey the young couple stopped for a few days in the city en route to their pretty country home, which Dudley had given his bride. There were some few matters of business to attend to, so Beatrice went with her husband to his office, and wandered at will from spot to spot. Hence it was that she suddenly came upon the whole of that luckless first edition and stood petrified with astonishment.

"Arthur, come here," she called, in such a stifled voice that he hastened to her side.

His quick eyes took in the situation and he folded his arms.

"Murder will out," he said grimly. "Yes, darling, I bought in the edition; there was no other way; they never could have sold; and—and I couldn't wait."

"No, dear, it is best to be honest, once and for ever; the little verses were—were—well—not up to the mark, you know—not what the public demands—and—and I couldn't bear to see your little heart poems laughed at, as they would have been. Forgive me—I knew it was you from the first—and—and—"

"You are mistaken; I never wrote those poems. Aunt Henrietta has given me permission to tell you. She has a quaint, old-fashioned idea that there shouldn't be secrets between a husband and wife. She—"

"She wrote them?" asked Dudley, in a low, breathless tone, coming close to her.

"Certainly. I undertook to see them through for her—to—"

But what she might have said was smothered in a tempestuous embrace.

"Thank God!" he murmured, as they turned their backs forever on the first edition.